Book Review

Herbarium. Robyn Stacey and Ashley Hay. 2004. Cambridge University Press, The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, U.K. 164 p., 115 color plates, \$75.00 hardcover (ISBN 0521842778), \$200.00 slipcase edition (ISBN 0521603927).

Robyn Stacey, a photographer, and Ashley Hay, an essayist, melded their talents to explore the myriad holdings of the National Herbarium of New South Wales at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Sydney, to give us this delightful coffee-table-size book.

Just the title is enough to give one pause. Few books address the subject of herbaria and the treasure troves of preserved plant specimens they house. This book is well done and offers a perspective from an Australian point of view, which in the end connects to all of us, with its shared trials and triumphs.

Herbarium encompasses brief essays on the history of the first herbarium in Australia, a folio of 106 exquisite photographs of some of the individual specimens (there were over a million from which to choose), plant notes for each specimen by the staff of the National Herbarium, notes on unpublished material, a bibliography, and an index.

The color photos are as informative today as when photography was new and the medium was being developed as another way of “seeing” (natural history collections especially).

The range is diverse; about one-fourth are seaweeds and the rest are land plants. The earliest specimen is a small, native violet collected by Joseph Banks and Daniel Solander in 1770, with its original note (“Botany Bay”) still attached to the plant. Other Banks and Solander collections, as well as present-day collections by less-well-known botanists, are included in the section “The New World.”

A section “Scientific Fascination” contains some specimens

that look as though they had been channeled through the artist’s imagination, but the tiny threads and small pieces of tape anchoring specimen to paper are a giveaway that the plants occurred naturally and, with their label data, have scientific meaning.

In a section “Hobby and Decoration,” assemblages of bits of unrelated plants such as ferns are charming examples of cutout projects for albums from the Victorian era.

The final section “Exotics” showcases specimens such as the fabulous slipper orchids. Reminiscent of floral portraits by artists such as Robert Mapplethorpe, Stacey’s images are likewise direct, but in this case, the flower’s color has changed subtly as an artifact of drying.

Adding to the plates, Hay’s essays are excellent and would be useful for beginning taxonomy students or for those at botanic gardens who need to explain the why and how of the herbarium to the public.

History buffs will find little gems in “the stories behind this huge dried garden,” as Hay aptly puts it. Who knew that the proof pages of Milton’s *Paradise Lost* were used for drying plants on Cook’s voyage? The book serves as an inspiration for us to document our own botanical world and discover the often unsung collectors responsible for preserving our botanical past.

With its arresting dust jacket of reddish flowers (technically, floral bracts) floating on a dramatic black background, it will serve as a handsome addition to the coffee table of anyone interested in plants.

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